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# Personality: Anteneh Shimelis

Rodney Martins

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A common problem confronting bird and habitat conservation is the contrast between the meticulous deliberations of conservation planners and the outcome of proposed preservation measures for priority sites on the ground. This contrast is perhaps most striking among the developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Here chance events and political developments often determine the preservation prospects at such sites. The disparity between conservation aspirations and reality has numerous causes; chief among these is the scarcity of effective and active conservationists from the nations concerned. These are the people who will be listened to as lobbyists of decision-makers at local and national level. Inevitably they are African nationals. Through the efforts of both Council and individual members of the ABC, usually in assistance to BirdLife International, the Club has sought to assist and collaborate with Africa's tiny but fast-emerging community of resident conservationists. This article introduces one such colleague, Anteneh Shimelis, a valued ABC collaborator from Ethiopia.

Born in 1972 in the ancient city of Harrar, Hararge province, eastern Ethiopia, Anteneh specialised in Natural Sciences at Harrar Senior Secondary School before winning a scholarship to Addis Ababa University where he studied Applied Biology in 1991–94. Most students in this subject move to careers in such fields as agriculture and rangeland management, but by graduation, Anteneh had become more interested in biodiversity studies and conservation planning. After a brief spell teaching biology in Addis, this interest led him to a post at the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS), in 1995, working on a 15-month inventory of Ethiopia's Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Published remarkably promptly<sup>1</sup>, this was the first comprehensive inventory of bird and wildlife sites of international or national conservation significance for any country within sub-Saharan Africa. The project entailed extensive travel throughout almost all provinces, enabling Anteneh to acquire a sound understanding of the status and distribution of Ethiopian birds. Thus was his fate sealed: Anteneh became a birder.

Pursuit of a broader understanding of the Afrotropical avifauna led Anteneh to venture beyond montane Ethiopia, firstly to Kibale forest in south-west Uganda where he attended the annual Tropical Biology Association field course in 1997. Here he



Anteneh Shimelis (Gary Allport/BirdLife International)

worked on characterisation of the local tropical forest bird community and identification of the species which most effectively act as indicators of disturbance. Later the same year, Anteneh assisted Graeme Backhurst as an Earthwatch volunteer on a long-term programme monitoring European passerine populations through trapping and banding at Ngulia, in Kenya's Tsavo West National Park.

Through the encouragement and support of Dr Gary Allport at BirdLife International, Anteneh moved to Britain in 1998 to study for a masters degree in Applied Ecology and Conservation at the University of East Anglia (UEA), in Norwich. Here his research focused on evaluating differences in breeding-habitat selection among Blackbird *Turdus merula* populations in rural and urban habitats in Norfolk. By this time, however, his interest had become fixed upon threatened species conservation management issues back at home in Ethiopia. Luckily, this reflects acknowledgement among conservation planners that Ethiopia deserves priority attention among sub-Saharan countries within strategic plans for the conservation of African threatened bird species. For some as yet unexplained reason Ethiopia holds a disproportion-

ate number of inexplicably localised threatened species. Arguably, most renowned among these is the genuinely enigmatic Ethiopian Bush Crow *Zavattariornis stressemanni*, a species presenting numerous intriguing questions in the fields of systematics, zoogeography and conservation management. To fulfil the requirements of the Wellcome Trust sponsorship of his studies in Britain, Anteneh began work on this species, in collaboration with Professor Bill Sutherland at the UEA, in 1999. The project is presently in progress. It seeks to use quantitative methods to characterise optimal habitat for the species, to deepen understanding of breeding biology and deliver robust recommendations for future conservation management. Submission for publication of the project's first output is anticipated this year.

Until such time as indigenous conservation organisations with pan-African influence emerge, the African conservation process is perhaps best advanced through assistance from, and contacts with, birders, ornithologists and conservationists from those nations that enjoy a well-established conservation culture. Anteneh's career-track and accomplishments are an exemplary illustration of how local commitment, resolve and enthusiasm can work constructively with individuals and institutions in the richer West. ABC will be fulfilling its goals if it can provide simple help to others who may follow Anteneh's path through the years to come. ♪

## Reference

1. Tilahun, S., Edwards, S. and Egziabher, T. 1996. *Important Bird Areas of Ethiopia: a first inventory*. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society.

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